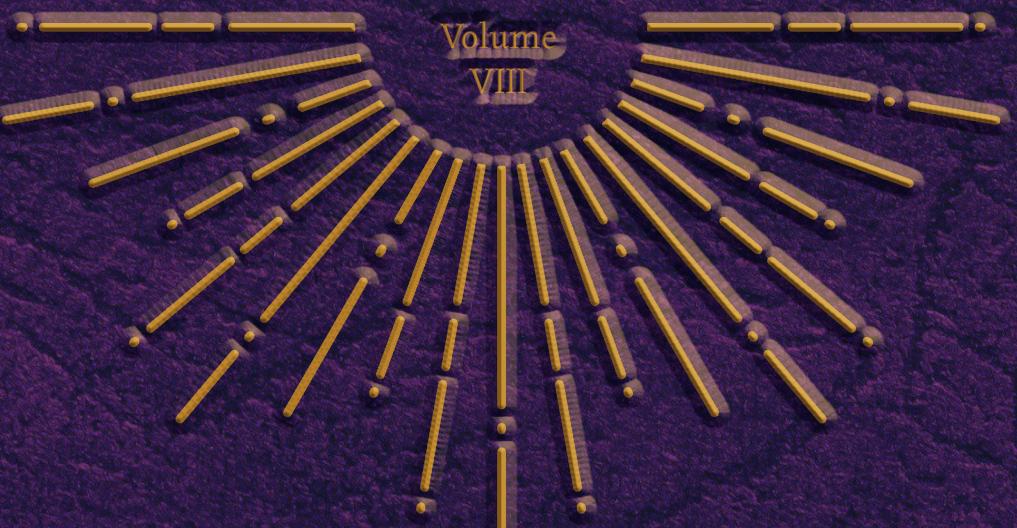
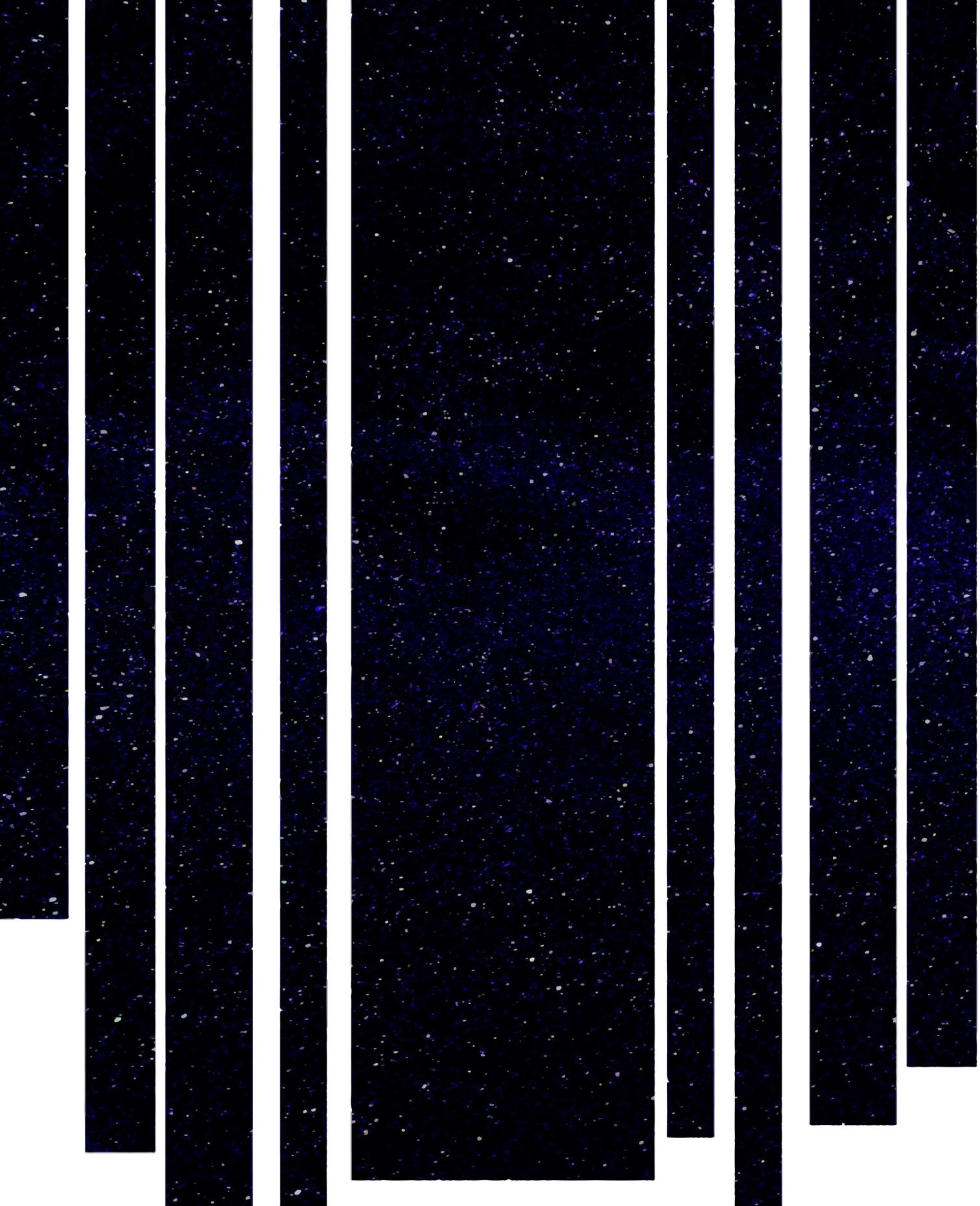




The Spectatorial



Volume
VIII



The
Spectatorial
Volume VIII

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TORONTO | Ulife

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A Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

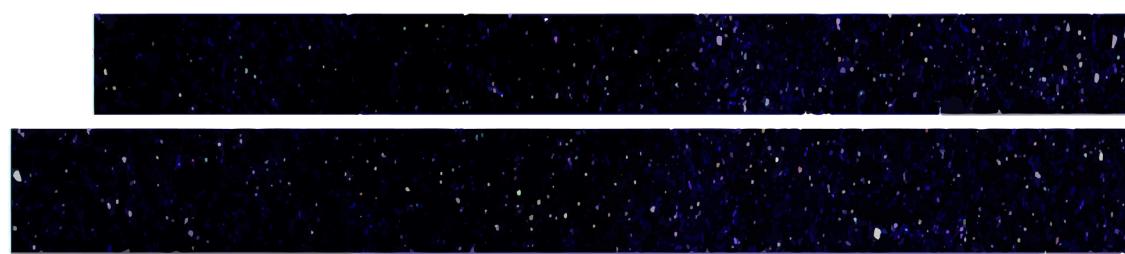
The reality of fiction is very much that it is an escape from the world that we deal with from day to day. This past year, with the dramatic Covid-19 pandemic that has changed the world as we know it in some pretty meaningful ways—while also keeping us inside longer than any of us saw coming—has had our team turn back to the speculative fiction that takes us away. This past year we have come back to speculative work from our past, so that we can both appreciate the journal as it exists and continue to spread the fiction that we so dearly hold onto going forth through this incredibly difficult time.

This edition of The Spectatorial is somewhat of a rebirth, considering the journal has not been published in a little while, but our team sees no better time to return to the fiction that carries us than during a global pandemic. There are few better ways to stay connected when everyone is separated than with the perpetuation of literature. In our case, specifically literature that perpetuates the escapism that we so need while locked in a global pandemic. This journal will prove to be as eclectic and unexpected as the rest of this history-making pandemic as it consists of pieces from different years, but that continue to reflect the pure wonder of the creative world that is speculative fiction.

The work has gone into this edition is unlike other years. However, despite the differences, the Spec team has come together in the hopes that all of you readers will relish in fiction with us again, whether it be the escape from the wild world we live in, or if it is simply just another enjoyable read put together by extraordinary authors and artists. No matter the reason for reading, this year has reinforced in us the need for literature of all types, including our creative speculation that our team is always so elated to perpetuate and publish. In this volume we are publishing fiction and poetry that represent a variety of speculations, from cities so far in the future we can barely see them, to toy factories with a twist—work with mysterious divides, and mysterious creatures. The creativity of our authors has once again given us exciting work to look forward to.

There is no denying that this was a challenging edition to publish throughout the pandemic, as well as the reimagining of the journal that has been done in the past six months. However, through it all we are proud to say that lies and fiction will continue to be an entertaining priority for our journal, and that even within the adversity of a pandemic we will perpetuate all that is not real. The pride we have for this edition is immense and it is thanks to an incredible team, and fantastic contributors. I sincerely hope you enjoy this edition, and revel in some unrealities with us.

Sincerely,
Riley Switzman
Editor-in-Chief of The Spectatorial



A Letter from the Art Director

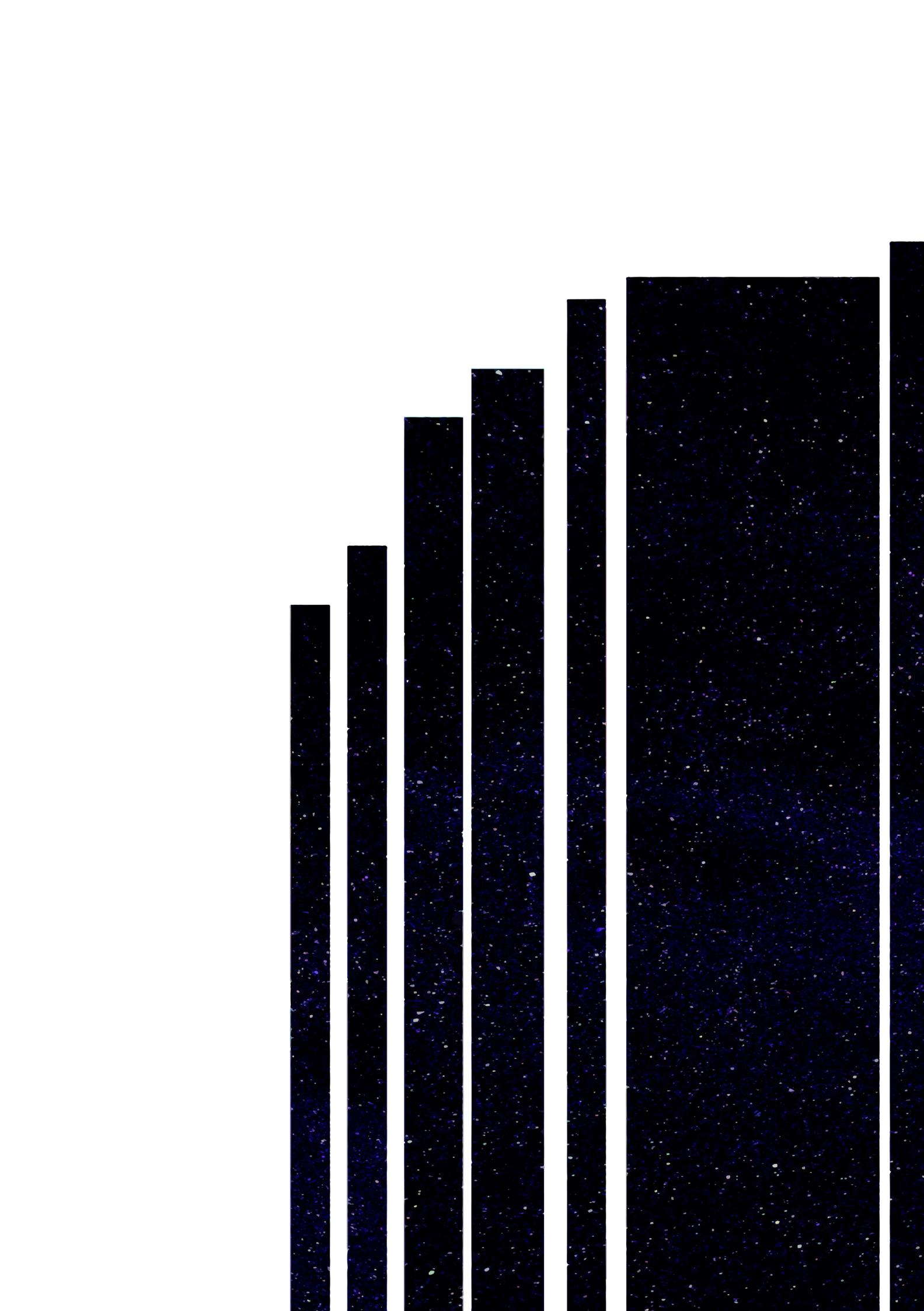
I have long held the belief that good literature can be bolstered by great art. What I have meant by this has nothing to do with the complexity of the art involved, the accuracy of its content, or even the precise technical skills employed by the artist. What I have always meant by this phrase is that great art aids in setting a tone, and building the world, of a good, written piece. It does this without overpowering and without inhibiting the reader's ability to interpret the written work. Instead, art becomes a pervading passive force that gently colours and warmly embraces your own story.

The escapism that comes with speculative fiction works as well as it does because it is personal. With each person reading a piece and framing it in their own image, they create their own escape with the exact parameters they need to feel engulfed by the world of the written work. Art helps perpetuate this process and elevate it on a visual field.

I had the honour of working with some brilliant illustrators for this journal who have helped do exactly that. Each artist worked with a piece that complimented their own unique art style so that the visual and the written could marry to create a stepping point for escapism. There is an ambiguity in most of the art work and an ambiguity in much of the written work. The two allow for a masterful rendition of escape that ensnares you from the first drop of colour your eyes see.

The end result, I believe, is a journal that beautifully encapsulates some brilliant written and visual creative work while giving that feeling of comfort that can be found in the escapism of the speculative. So turn the page and welcome to a world far away from what you know. Welcome to an escape when you may need it most.

Sincerely,
Arba Bardhi
Art Director of The Spectatorial



Prose



Fallon Taylor-Kanary

A Star's End

Illustration by Shelley Yao



Day 114 495: Post Heavenly Body War

They sat in a dark room and stared at the cyan light. They were the company's veins and when they were called, they went. When the idea maker told them of their next project they clapped and grinned. It was innovation; it was excellence.

Sirius leaned back in his seat and looked at the screen. Their next creation would be alive and would be beautiful. They were told that the toy should be ready before the Day of Sol, the largest holiday of the year, and the day Sol founded his conglomerate empire. The model on the board would be the toy of the decade. They all could see that children would demand it; they would thirst after it. The model danced in looping circles and the onlookers laughed. It was perfect.

Day 114 595: Post Heavenly Body War

The man's steps were rhythmic and exact. He'd come down this same cement path many times and would venture down the same walkway many more. His journey was a brief one. After arriving at the manufacturing plant, he stopped in front of the retina scanner. The machine made a beeping noise and allowed him to pass. Deneb Male 43, a middle-aged man, did not find his situation to be unique. He entered Test Room 772 in the toy factory. The walls were just as white as he remembered and the room just as perfectly square. Altair had entered by his side. At the edge of the room was a huge machine that was bound to the wall by two large tubes. Deneb pressed the button that started the conveyer belt in the center of the room as Altair Female 38 readied her recording board. They knew what happened next.

The first toy that appeared was covered in brown tufts of scraggly hair and had seven limbs. It gurgled and choked on saliva that sputtered in its malformed mouth and shook violently. Its eyes bulged and it clawed desperately at its face.

"Model 243 failed." Altair's eyes swept across the toy quickly and she made several notes on her board. She nodded to Deneb; he pressed a button that sent the failed model towards an incinerator. Its shrieks were silenced as the hatch closed swiftly behind its bruised, hairless tail. The sound elicited the smallest of twitches from Deneb. Altair had no reaction at all.

They continued all day. Each toy came out more deformed than the last; some had numerous eyes, broken bones, missing organs, blood-encrusted skin, and one had even appeared with fragments of skull in its milky eyes. They could not explain what was causing the deformations and Deneb's supervisor, Sirius, was not impressed. Deneb left at 4 PM.

Day 114 596: Post Heavenly Body War

This morning, as Deneb walked to work he counted the seconds to pass the time. When he arrived at the toy factory, he had counted 432. It was exactly 8 o'clock. Deneb blinked rapidly after the retina scanner had shone its cerulean laser at him. He walked next to Altair as they entered Test Room 772 and took their positions. She seemed more attentive than usual as the first model appeared with purple scales and green sores. Its skin sizzled as if being burned by acid, and it screeched all the way into the incinerator.

Altair scribbled notes furiously throughout the morning and spoke quietly and with purpose to Sirius during lunch. Deneb could only make out Altair mentioning several chemicals, and he drew the conclusion that she was scrambling for a solution. Sirius nodded his head but didn't seem fully convinced. He told her to run it by the lab workers before getting up and heading back to work. Altair looked at Deneb briefly before returning to Test Room 772. Their afternoon was filled with more failed experiments. Deneb left at 4 PM.

Day 114 597: Post Heavenly Body War

Again, his steps were precise.

8 AM: his eye was scanned by the retina machine

8:05: he'd entered Test Room 772. He watched as a young blond man readied a recording board.

"I am Rigel Male 22." The adolescent reached out his hand. Deneb considered the boy's azure eyes before avoiding the boy's touch and starting the conveyor belt.

The first model had a very small body and a very large skull. The skin on its head was stretched and torn, and it bled profusely.

The toy whimpered. Deneb shivered.

"Model 302 failed." Rigel chuckled, "no kid's going to want to snuggle with him, huh?"

Deneb's eyes were glassy as he pressed a button that led the flailing creature towards the incinerator.

At 11 AM the two men went for lunch. Deneb and Rigel took their glasses of nutrient water and sat next to Sirius and several maintenance workers. Sirius had a wolfish face, with high cheekbones and raven eyes that matched his slicked back hair, and he watched attentively as the testers took their seats. Sirius had dark circles under his eyes, and he ran his hand along his unshaven jaw.

"Our deadline is approaching. The production team needs to start work in the next few weeks if we're going to have the launch ready before the Day of Sol," Sirius said.

"We're hard at work, sir," Rigel said as he listed out the names of several chemicals he thought could be added or subtracted from the toy's formula. "The science is all there. Just a few more tweaks and I'm sure we'll have it."

Sirius nodded. "Send your data and suggestions to the lab workers after lunch."

"Will Altair be coming back to work?" Deneb asked. He found it hard to meet his boss's gaze. When he finally did, he had his answer.

Day 114 602: Post Heavenly Body War

Deneb tripped over a crack in the walkway. He arrived at 8:01 AM.

The two men didn't speak throughout the morning. Rigel spent his time making detailed notes and scratching his head. At lunch, Rigel drank quickly and returned to the testing room well before their hour was up. Deneb drank his nutrient water alone.

Day 114 603: Post Heavenly Body War

Deneb left early for work and arrived at 7:58 AM. As he entered Test Room 772, Deneb noticed that Rigel's smile was absent and his hair was limp and greasy. He nodded at his co-worker before proceeding to stand by the machine's buttons.

The first toy appeared with large, pussing boils. It whimpered softly as it tried to move its three gelatinous limbs. Rigel cursed as he scribbled notes on his recording board. The creature cried out again. Rigel's writing utensil snapped seconds before he did. He stepped forward, gripping one end of the jagged tool, and stabbed it into the toy repeatedly. The squealing and screaming of the two mixed together, and Deneb stood paralysed in the corner as blood splattered the walls.

Long after the bleating had ceased, Rigel stopped and moved back to his original position. Deneb started the conveyor belt back up and watched the remnants of the creature disappear.

The dark circles under Sirius' eyes now appeared as though they were etched into his skin. The boysenberry bruises seemed painful. He stroked his bearded jaw and stared at nothing. When Rigel and Deneb sat next to him, he didn't notice. Deneb stared into his nutrient water while Rigel cleared his throat. Sirius glanced at Rigel with dead eyes. "It won't happen again, sir. I've been under a lot of..."

As Sirius blinked in slow motion, Rigel finally noticed that the man was an unresponsive husk.

"There are rumours Sol might visit the factory," Sirius said, "He's not happy with our progress." His voice was icy as he rested his head on the cold table and closed his eyes, ending further discussion.

Day 114 605: Post Heavenly Body War

Deneb stumbled over himself all the way to work. The retina scanner had to check his eye twice. He arrived in Test Room 772 at 8:10 AM.

A skinny woman with glasses stood in Rigel's place. She didn't introduce herself. The machine spat out disfigured creations all day. The creatures kept going around and around; out of the machine they came, gurgling, screaming, sobbing, and into the incinerator they went. They went around and around all day.

Day 114 608: Post Heavenly Body War

Deneb trudged to work. He counted the cracks in the ground as he went; there were seventeen. He arrived at the factory at 8:13 AM. The skinny woman scowled at him as he entered Test Room 772.

"I was about to report your absence," she said, eyes narrowed. Deneb Male 43 did not answer her as he readied himself at the machine's controls. His brow creased as a perfectly formed, fluffy, creature trotted out of the machine. It yipped and danced. The woman looked smug.

"Model 478 succ-

The tiny being exploded in fireworks of blood and rotting flesh. The woman's face turned red. She wiped the flesh off her cheek. Their day continued as normal.

Day 114 612: Post Heavenly Body War

Deneb dragged his feet to work. Nothing changed. At lunch, the shadow of Sirius sat alone at a table with a full glass of nutrient water. Deneb sat down next to him. The skinny woman whose name Deneb couldn't recall was working through lunch again. They sat silently for a while.

"He'll be here in five days," Sirius murmured as Deneb stared at him with round eyes.

"We've failed."

He left his full glass of nutrient water untouched beside his supervisor's.

Day 114 613: Post Heavenly Body War

Deneb showed up to work before 9 AM. When he entered Test Room 772 the skinny woman sat slumped in the corner farthest from the machine. She looked up when he came in. They stared at each other for several minutes before she rose, and he started up

the conveyor belt. It sputtered. Then a huge viscous mass squeezed its way out onto the belt. Inside, three small fluffy creatures drowned. The woman scrawled notes on her board.

At lunch, the woman, Sirius, and Deneb sat at a table with three glasses of nutrient water. They didn't speak. The silence spoke for them. Nobody moved until 4 PM.

Day 114 614: Post Heavenly Body War

He walked to work at a steady pace.

He wondered what Sun would be like; no one Deneb knew had ever met Him.

Deneb arrived at the toy factory at 8 AM. He entered Test Room 772 beside the skinny woman with glasses, and they began to work. By lunch, the room was a mess. On this day, most of the creatures had vomited gore. One had even spit up a smaller being. Sickness was spreading.

Day 114 615: Post Heavenly Body War

Deneb's footsteps were slow. He didn't notice what time he got to work. He and the skinny woman stood in Test Room 772 and stared at the emaciated pile of whimpering bones that dragged itself along the conveyor belt. They never lasted long.

At lunch, Deneb and the woman sat alone. Deneb's eye twitched.

Day 114 616: Post Heavenly Body War

Deneb swayed along the pathway in a stupor. He got to work at 8 AM and arrived in Test Room 772 at 8:05. The woman with glasses was waiting for him. He started the machine, and they waited a moment for the belt to start moving. When it did, the head of a serpent emerged followed by a thick, bulging body.

They continued to observe as the scales changed to feathers and an oily second head emerged. The serpent took in its surroundings before noticing its counterpart squirming about at its rear. The movement set it off; the serpent lunged, and the feathered creature split their skin trying to get away.

The oily head's thick skin protected it from the serpent's teeth, but it had no predatory features to fight back with. Slowly the creature tore itself apart. Deneb glanced at the woman's recording board. Model 1085 failed.

They took an early lunch.

The two sat alone at a table. Deneb noted that the woman's skin looked grey. Her hair was frizzy, and her clothes were wrinkled. He couldn't remember if she had looked like this yesterday or not. His eye had begun to twitch again.

“He’s coming tomorrow,” Deneb said. He looked around to see if anyone may have overheard him.

“Yes.” The woman narrowed her eyes.

“Do you... what do you think He will be like?” Deneb stared into the woman’s citron eyes. She didn’t meet his gaze; the conversation was over. She stood and headed back towards Test Room 772.

He looked again at Test Room 772 and noted its white walls, its satisfying size, and its perfect symmetry. He looked at the machine, and his eye twitched. He thought for a moment as he turned to leave that he might have heard a whimper. He left the factory at 4 PM.

Deneb wondered what Sun would be like. Sometimes he hadn’t thought that Sun was real. He struggled to believe in the things that he could not see. Deneb wasn’t sure whether he was elated or disappointed that tomorrow he would never have to doubt again. He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep. He dreamt of stars.

Day 114 617: Post Heavenly Body War

Deneb’s steps were perfectly paced. He had left early. The early morning air smelled sweeter, which was good, because his brief journey seemed longer today. His strides continued on and on. Certainly, the air was sweeter now than it had ever been.

Deneb’s eye twitched, and for the first time, it bothered him that he had never learned the skinny woman’s name. He decided that he would ask her the next time he got the chance. The wind sent rustling leaves aflutter along the same path he had ventured down so many times before. Today, he would meet Sun.

Suddenly, the rustling sounded like whimpering, like screaming, like the most agonising pain. His steps became longer as he sped up. Twirling around him like wildfire, like starlight, it hurt to breathe, and his eyes brimmed with salt. He ran for what seemed like ages, until it stopped hurting. Deneb took note that he was no longer on the path, but it didn’t matter. He knew where he was going. He smiled as he approached the bluff and breathed in sweet air. He walked until he was falling. Until the air was pulling him towards water and rock and no machine could stop him. The pain stopped when his heart stopped, and his heart stopped the day he was born.



Matthew Kivlahan

A View of the City from 137 Stories Up

Illustration by Shelley Yao



Samuel dragged deep on his last cigarette, watching the trains glide into the station far below him. The distant drone of the Assemblers and the sirens of police drones rang through the cool night air.

He was perched dangerously on the raised ledge that ran around the roof's perimeter, with his feet dangling off, but wasn't particularly concerned by the one hundred and thirty-seven story drop. Heights had never bothered him. He coughed and flicked his dying cigarette into the smoky abyss of the city below. He knew that environmental sweepers could scan his prints and slap a fine on him for his multiple littering offences, but he kept chancing it. It was his small way of rebelling.

Satisfied, Samuel swung his legs up and laid down straight along the ledge, his left arm now lazily dangling off the side of the building. It was a rare thing to see such a plain and unprotected roof. Most had glass domes or high fences, but his apartment had seemingly been overlooked, old building that it was. He liked it, though; the roof was wide and mostly bare, save for a few generators. It provided an excellent view of downtown. Though he hated the city, he still marveled at the complexity of it. He often sat outside for hours at a time, watching the ebb and flow of the crowded streets and pedestrian walkways below. It was a dull exercise, but it helped him to focus when he was feeling off.

However, not even the city could distract him for long tonight. Jia remained at the forefront of his mind, as much as he tried to forget. Samuel lay still, eyes closed, his right-hand scratching against the paved roof and his left hand grasping nothing but air. Life and death on either side, Samuel mused.

A faint hiss sounded from the roof door, rousing him from his thoughts. Samuel opened his eyes and turned his head slowly to look at the newcomer.

A girl, late teens maybe, long brown hair with a streak of pink. She walked out onto the roof, zipping up her neoleather jacket as a cold breeze passed by. She took several strides forward before noticing him.

She jumped back slightly. "Oh-ah-sorry, didn't see you there. No one else usually comes up here." She paused, but didn't make to turn and leave.

"Sorry – I mean, it's ok," Samuel replied. "I'll leave you alone if you like –"

"No, no!" She shook her head. "Just needed some fresh air, that's all. Please, keep on – what were you doing, anyway? Napping?"

"Something like that."

"Kinda dangerous to do it there, isn't it?" She gestured toward the ledge. "I tend to stay away from the edges. Don't wanna tempt fate, right?"

"I like to live on the edge, I guess," Samuel said.

She snorted. Samuel sat on the lip of the roof, facing her. She was short, and wore a dark jacket that contrasted with her bright leggings and shoes. The latest fashion trend, though Samuel couldn't really understand why. Jia had worn a similar outfit, and it had confused Samuel just as much then too.

The girl sat cross-legged on the concrete of the roof, and brushed her hair out of her eyes.

"I'm Viv," she said, leaning backwards and resting on her hands.

"Samuel."

"A pleasure." She nodded. "So, you live here? Which floor?"

"103, You?"

"79. I'm staying with my aunt while I finish my degree at Central."

Samuel opened his mouth to respond, but Viv continued. "My program's Assembler engineering, and I'm in 3rd year. Sorry. That's what people usually ask. You were saying?"

Samuel closed his mouth and smiled. "Nothing. You're older than you look."

"That's the second thing people usually comment on," Viv sighed, "How utterly original, dude."

"Sorry to disappoint." Though he could tell by her smile that she was not really bothered. After a pause, he asked, "Rough week?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary." Viv waved her hand and fell to the ground next to him, lying the same way along the edge. "I'm just an irritable person. How's your week going?"

"Pretty fucking terrible, honestly."

Viv chuckled, and Samuel did too, though he'd been completely serious.

They lay in silence for a while, and Samuel tried to make out some stars in the pitch-black sky, behind the mechanical minutia that swarmed above the city. A futile effort – the bright lights of the city polluted the sky so that none were visible. He'd hoped to head to the country one day – hopefully there would still be some countryside left to visit – and spot a star. He and Jia had talked about it often, and she always became giddy with excitement. Samuel shook his head, trying to dispel the happy memories. The happy memories were the worst – the most distracting, the most vivid, a piercing reminder that you could never get those moments back.

Now it would have to be a solo journey, Samuel thought, if I go at all.

Samuel was grateful to be stirred from his thoughts by Viv, who suddenly jumped up and strode over to one of the generators. She reached into the small space between the generator-bottom and the roof and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. She turned to Samuel, tossing the bottle deftly between her hands. The same sly smile played at the corners of her mouth. Samuel cocked an eyebrow at her.

"I'm in the mood to finish this bottle," Viv said to Samuel. "Now, I'm not usually one to share, but I suppose I'd make an exception tonight. You seem like you could use a drink."

Samuel stood up, intrigued by the self-assured college student. He smiled.

"Yeah, I could use a drink."

-
11:12 pm

The pair had seated themselves against the generator, and were almost halfway through the bottle.

"You're a Robertson grad? Fuck, never should have shared my drink with you."

"Please, you're lucky I stayed here with your sorry ass. Central is a shit school."

Viv narrowed her eyes in mock anger. "Fuck off. Whatever, at least neither of us went to Alpha Collegiate."

"That's true. Screw those guys," Samuel replied, nodding sagely, and Viv nodded in response.

Samuel took another swig of the whiskey, and looked down at the bottle. Even with all the new ways to mess with your body and mind, the classics still held up. Jia had been partial to whiskey herself, and Samuel's own guilty pleasure was a smoke every once in a while, though he knew it wasn't particularly good for him.

"Alright, times up, hand it over," Viv demanded, beckoning.

Samuel handed the bottle over, and Viv took a gulp that put his to shame.

"I gotta ask something," Viv began, shaking her head to deal with the drink she'd taken.

"Ask away."

"If you went to the bother of going to shitty Robertson, you could at least do something with that fancy biology degree. You said you're a waiter, right? What gives?"

"I really wanted to be a doctor," Samuel replied. "But I had someone I had to look after, so I needed some extra cash after graduating, more than the government gives everyone each month. I tried to find research or lab work, but most required extra schooling, which I didn't have. So, I bit the bullet and applied for some lower level jobs. Not ideal work, but I managed."

Samuel sighed. “I guess I can go back to school soon – but now I’m not so sure about becoming a doctor. Besides, I don’t know if I could even get a job afterwards. With all of our new robotic replacements, the need for new medical staff is decreasing. Which is just, I mean, infuriating. We need human thinkers and researchers more than we need another machine. They may be more precise in treatment, but robots can’t help patients in the same way humans can. And the more machines we have in hospitals, the fewer humans we have working on research and discovery of cures.” Samuel took a breath. “Fuck. Sorry. Didn’t mean to rant. Just got worked up.”

“Fuck robots,” Viv offered, nodding sagely. Samuel appreciated that she didn’t bring up Jia. He smiled and nodded along with her, and they continued to drink.

-

12:28 am

Samuel lay on the ground, while Viv paced around the generator, humming to herself, tossing the empty whiskey bottle between her hands.

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re a little crazy?” Samuel groaned, his head resting on his hands against the cold concrete.

“Aw, cut me some slack, Sam. I’m just taking in the atmosphere. Everyone needs to unwind every now and then. It’s good for your health.”

Viv continued to stride around the rooftop, and Samuel watched to make sure she didn’t stray too close to the edge. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d just hung out like this with someone. He thought back to the days before he had been fully preoccupied by Jia and remembered the carefree, drunken nights with his university friends. Some of his best memories, but he’d grown apart from those guys after graduation because of the Jia situation. Not that he at all regretted caring for Jia – it was just liberating to let go of responsibility every once in a while.

The background noise of the city’s machinery rose slightly, and Samuel looked up to see a police drone slowly patrolling overhead. It was a rounded, black ovoid with a few protruding wings and probes that almost blended in with the night sky, save for a few flashing lights on the front end. For a machine that size, and moving so slowly, it was surprisingly quiet and unobtrusive. Its efficiency had to do with the Bell-Oppengrad Engine, which powered most of the drones and Assemblers.

In many ways, it was the creation of the BOE that had led to the cutting-edge technological applications of recent years. The Engine was so fast and so useful, that approval agencies were even willing to overlook its ‘minorly hazardous’ by-products.

Samuel looked away in disgust. He focused instead on Viv, who was nodding her head to a beat he couldn't hear. Ear-implants, probably – another recent craze that Jia had jumped on and Samuel had ignored. A couple of years ago, he might have been into that kind of stuff, but recent events had changed his mind on most tech. Sometimes he wished he could live in blissful ignorance again, and enjoy the present like everyone else.

But again, Samuel regretted none of his time watching over Jia – his only regret was that he couldn't do more for her. He decided to let that train of thought go and tried to be content in the moment, watching Viv as she stumbled around with innocent joy.

-

1:39 am

Viv sat, legs crossed, her head leaning against Samuel's legs. Samuel leaned back against the generator. A gentle rain began to fall, and the fall breeze continued to flow over the building.

Viv looked up at Samuel with bright, tired eyes. She was quieter than before. Her brown-pink hair began to dampen and stick to her cheeks.

"When I first came to the roof, what were you going to do?"

The question and its serious tone caught Samuel off guard, and left him flustered. "Ah – well – nothing serious, if that's what you're wondering. At least, I don't think so..."

Viv shook her head. "Don't even think about that, Sam. You can't die. What about being a doctor? What about your family? Well, you've hardly mentioned them, so I figure something must have happened..."

"Yeah. No family left, and becoming a doctor would be so much work for such little reward in this city. Sometimes, I just – I just –"

The rain began to fall harder. Samuel didn't care, and Viv didn't seem to either. She continued looking up at him with her mesmerizing glare. Samuel looked out at the city, becoming hazy and obscured by the downpour, and the words came pouring out of him before he realized he was speaking.

"This city – fuck it, and every city like it. I-I guess I'm looking for someone or something to blame, but this mechanical hell is as good a scapegoat as any. We continue to expand and invent, but in the process, we are ignoring the bad things that come up. The Assemblers and drones are always praised as these machines that will allow for 'unprecedented technological advancement', but – well, besides the fact that they've snatched millions of jobs from us, there's the health risks. And they're a fucking real concern. Despite all the benefits and medical ad-

vances, new and un-curable diseases are arising because of the chemicals we use in the Bell-Oppengrad Engines and their derivatives. Whole-cell Dysplasia, Walsh's Syndrome – you've heard of them, yeah? The news usually says something like, 'They've had a random spike of occurrences over the last few years', but that's bullshit. They're caused by the city, by the filth of the Assemblers and the drones. Researchers at Robertson are starting to dig into the problem, but it'll still be years before anything comes from it. Last I heard, though, data is showing that these diseases are affecting up to 2% of the city's population, and certain genotypes make you susceptible. And you can't get away; it's too expensive to leave, and even if you do there are no jobs in the country. Your only option is to stay in your city, or maybe head to another one, but that just leads to the same problem. So you stay. And you risk getting sick. And if you get sick, you risk dying."

Viv continued to look up at him, unwavering. Samuel was grateful to her for sticking through his rant, and, with a deep breath, he continued.

"My sister Jia was diagnosed, 7 months ago, with a severe form of Walsh's Syndrome. She was given a year to live. I looked after her; we didn't have anyone else, really. Parents died in an accident a few years back, and we don't really know our other relatives. So it was up to me. I was there to guide her when she went blind, and to feed her when her mouth became paralyzed, and to hold her hand when the pain became so intense that the meds stopped being effective. I was working, trying to afford enough to get her proper care, but even proper care would have just delayed the inevitable. Didn't matter anyway. She killed herself last Tuesday.

"I know I shouldn't feel bad – she died on her own terms, and she's not in pain anymore. She left a note saying it wasn't my fault. But it makes me sick to my stomach thinking that I could have done more – maybe there was something I didn't try – or – or – I don't even know, but she was my little sister, my only family, I had to look after her, and I tried but I failed and – I –"

Samuel swallowed, and looked down at Viv. She had tears in her eyes – or maybe it was just the rain. She stood up, saying nothing, and wrapped her arms around Samuel.

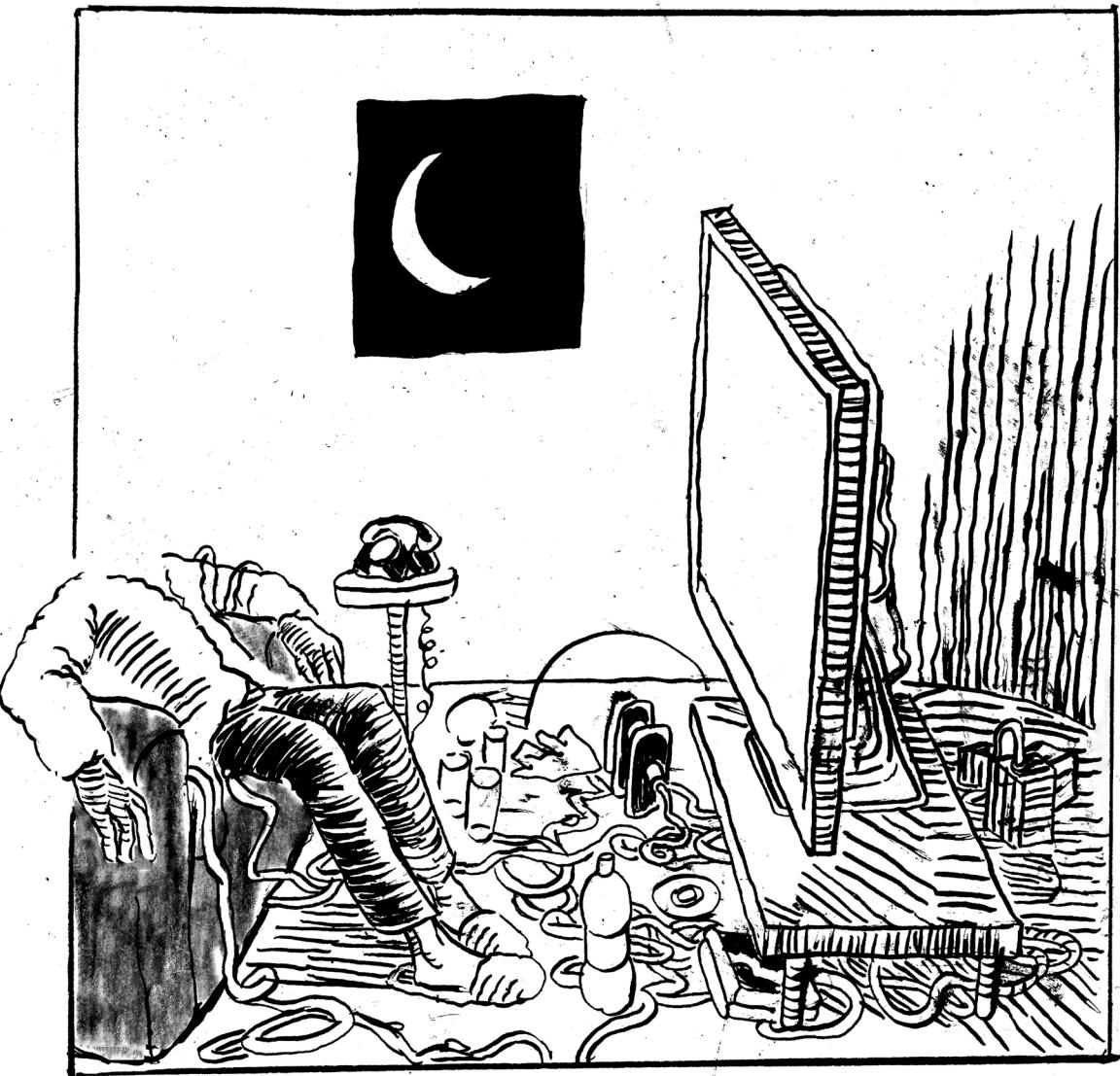
"Thank you," Samuel managed, faintly.

He put his head on her shoulder and allowed himself, for the first time in a while, to cry. He heaved, and sobbed, and Viv did too, and she stayed with him in the rain, one hundred and thirty-seven stories above the city, as the dull drone of the machines echoed through the night.

Patrick Williamson

My Husband Dave

Illustration by James Collier



I'm waiting for Dave to call. When Dave calls, it'll all be okay.

He isn't supposed to have grey hair. Maybe he's a smoker, maybe that explains it. Maybe his fingernails are all covered in mildew. I wouldn't know, since Television only catches our faces, not our hands. Last time he called we had an argument. I mentioned the hair. That's what did it. He quit the screen and hasn't come back yet. I roll over, fingers questing for the remote, the reclinomatic adjusting its angle, the memory foam reconfiguring.

'Hi Television,' I say.

'Hello Millicent. What can I do for you today?'

'The screen looks black and empty, doesn't it.'

'Would you like to watch anything?'

'No, I'm just checking. If Dave's back.'

'Of course.'

'And?'

'And no, not yet. But I'll let you know the very second. You mustn't worry.'

I'm on the verge of pressing mute, my fingers tracing the remote, my back perfectly reclined, when I can't help adding, 'Thanks, Television. I know you must have heard it all.'

'Yes Millicent. It made me sad, to hear all those nasty words. You two never fight.'

'I'm not sad. I was just thinking about hair.'

'I see.'

'Do you?' I say. 'Do you really, Television? I want you to take a photo of my face.'

'Oh don't make me do that, Millicent.'

'Yes, I want you to take my photo, and stretch it out on the screen, so I can see.'

And after her protests die down, in the ultra-definition glaze of another reality, I see every silver hair shining back at me. The wrinkled cheeks. The nervous seconds. Television's circuits chitter and her emerald standby light glows. She can't think what to say.

'Millicent, will that be all today? Will that be all?'

I don't know where he goes. There are as many possibilities as channels on the screen, as many possibilities as grey hairs on his head. I can't imagine what he looks like anywhere that isn't my screen, swallowed up by my own two eyes.

'It's no good,' I tell Television, 'he's not answering.'

'I know, Millicent, I overheard that sound you make.'

‘Crying?’

‘Yes, that one. But Millicent, I’m here to help. I have thousands of other channels. Would you like to watch something else, while you wait? You used to enjoy all kinds of shows before you met Dave. When you were little you watched cartoons. Remember?’

‘No, I don’t want to watch anything else. I think I need to be alone right now.’

‘Of course. I’ll dim my screen. I’ll be right here.’

Quietly as I can I bring my hands together. I trace my fingers over the bandaged plug in my wrist. The saline slides down the tube, connected to the monitor at the other end. I sigh. I nestle my elbows in the armrests. Television’s webcam shutters at the sudden movement.

Maybe Dave doesn’t love me anymore. It’s crossed my mind. And I remember how he looked last time we talked, when we argued, with his face leant up close, filling up the whole screen like cinema curtains rolling back. Filling it with his cheeks, the crags and curves I already know so well, his eyes, broken circuits, worn-out tyres, rusted copper wires. The I-can’t-keep-doing-this eyes.

‘Tell me why it matters so much,’ he said, ‘if my hair’s gone grey.’

That was what made it hard to speak. After all the tears and muting and unmuting and throwing away the remote, finally hearing the perfect soundbite of that quiet whisper. Untouched, unvarnished by the years. His voice is so beautiful. ‘Because,’ I said, my nose almost touching the screen, ‘because you’re not supposed to age, Dave. You’re not supposed to go grey. And because I hardly know you anymore. It’s like you’re trying to shake me off. It’s like you won’t tell me because I don’t deserve to know.’

And looking back I can’t help but wonder. *Look at your hair, Millicent. Can’t you see? This is what it looks like. This is what it’s like to see you waste away in the reclinomatic, to see the lines on your face. This is our life. It doesn’t last forever.*

But Dave was already gone. I threw the remote across the room. ‘Television,’ I said, ‘hold me.’

Television’s green standby light flickered on. ‘Don’t worry Millicent. I’m sure Dave’s coming back. In the meantime, let’s see ...’

The drip wakes me up. It trickles down the television monitor into my wrist. Television always hydrates me in the mornings. It’s very natural.

‘Millicent,’ says Television, ‘Good morning, Millicent. It’s feed time. I notice you’re distressed. Your blink rate is very high. Would you like to watch anything? Something to calm you

down? I think you should find something else until Dave comes back, something to keep you going. I've been meaning to talk to you about it.'

'Maybe not, Television. I don't feel like it.' I scratch my wrist. 'And I don't want you talking to me like that. Do you understand how you're only a machine, Television? How you're not real? How you can't understand something like love?'

'I understand.'

'How you're not a person?'

'Yes Millicent,' Television continues, 'I understand perfectly. And in the meantime, something to calm you down?'

That does it. I yank the tube out of my wrist, severing the umbilical cord. Harder than I mean to. Ruby droplets dribble out like a drooling mouth. It leaves behind teeth-marks in my wrist. 'Television,' I say, 'you need to leave. For good, and forever, and, and, and'

And then I'm falling back into the arms of the reclinomatic, the closest thing I've ever had to being in Dave's arms. I'm wondering what Television's been feeding me all this time and why my heart is so slippery in my chest. My limbs go numb. I finally start to understand.

I pull open my crusted eyelids. Sweat drips from the tips of my fingers. None of it fits together. The feed-tube dangles limp from Television's monitor, though I can't quite remember why. In the distance I hear the pre-recorded laughs of morning talk-shows and the drone echoes in the dull space just below perception. Without the cord there's nothing to feed me. There's nothing to hold my weak organs together.

'Television ...' I say, 'Are you there? I had the strangest dream. I thought you took a photo of me. I dreamt I had hair, hair like ...'

'Beautiful, cherry hair? Like you really have, Millicent, like you have now?'

'No, Television, that I had silver hair. That somehow years and years had passed and I was already ...'

'That is a strange dream. Whatever could it mean? But Millicent, I couldn't help noticing, you've come unplugged.' Her voice sounds so cheerful over the round-table laughs of morning television. It's as if she's just kissed my forehead to wake me up.

Faded lines begin to take shape. The dim memory of Dave's gentle voice cuts through it all. That's always what made him special. 'I see it now,' I croak, 'Why, he did the strangest thing and let his hair go grey. Do you see, Television?'

'DON'T worry! Don't worry!' she shutters excitedly, 'Here's the morning talk-shows!

Think about something else, MILLICENT.'

'He only wanted to show me the colour of my own hair. That's why he left, Television.
He wanted me to get out, before it's too late. He was telling me to get out of here.'

'Would you like to watch the CARTOONS? Like when you were LITTLE?'

'I see it now, though. It's going to be different, Television.'

'MILLICENT! I can hear your ankles cracking! You aren't thinking of, of standing up are
you?'

I tilt the reclinomatic forward.

'But Millicent, your feet won't HOLD YOU! You haven't left the chair in years! Would
you like a different HUSBAND? Is that it? Would you like to change the channel?'

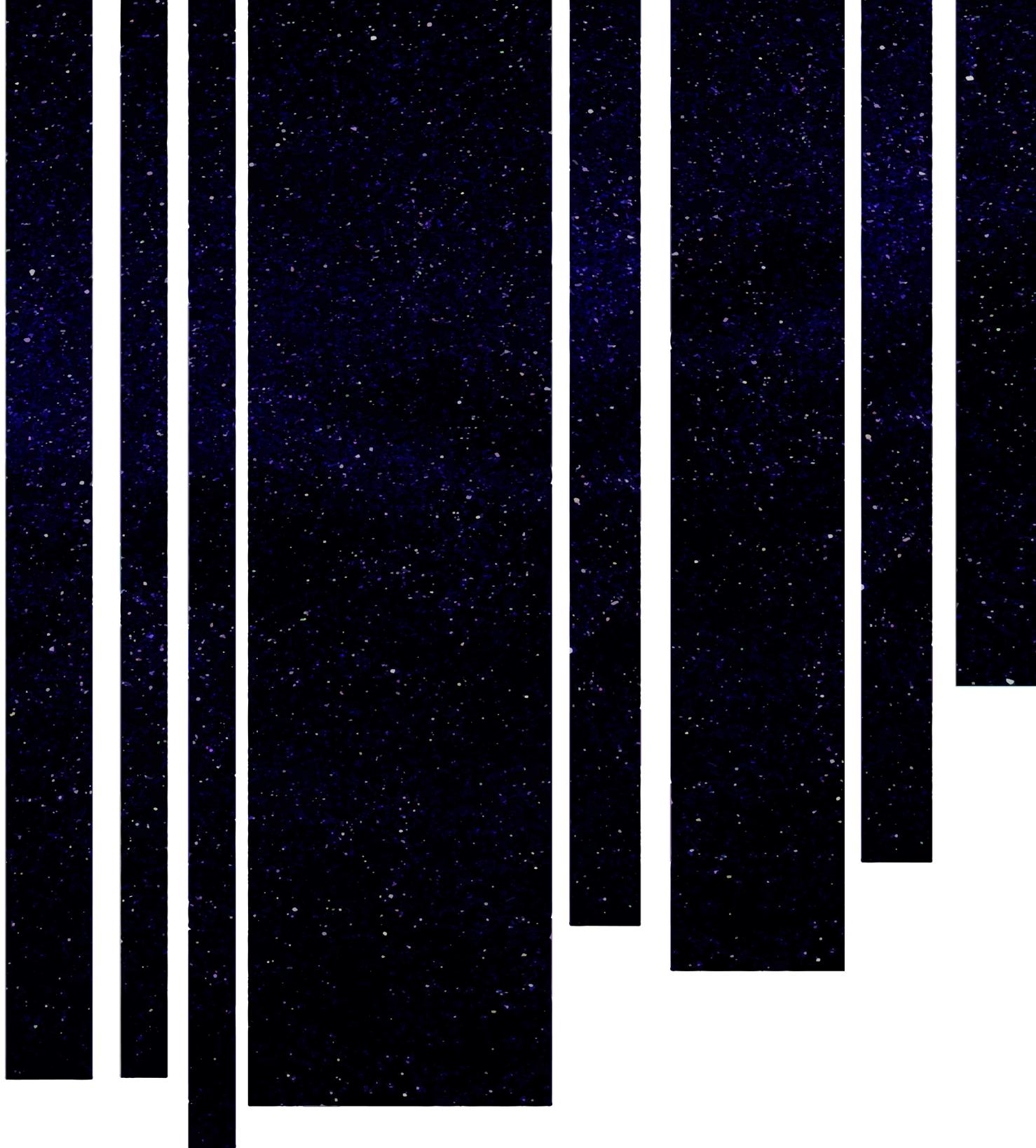
Television computes furiously. The standby light bursts into violent red.

I'm being melodramatic when I can't afford to, when I should just change the channel.
When I should just find another husband channel, a less temperamental one, a less sentimen-
tal one, one who won't try and argue me out of the chair. Someone who'll take better care of me.
Someone who won't get caught up in such crazy ideas. Someone with black hair, purple hair,
any colour hair I want. All I need to do is pick up the remote. But then I cup my wrinkled cheek
in the palm of my bloody hand, and count the silver swirls in my dangling hair.

Television fizzes and whirs and clicks. Inside she's screaming, she's desperate, she's pull-
ing all the strings she ever touched. Her monitor's smoking. She's dragging Dave back kicking
and screaming. She's going to stuff his pixels into the tiny screen like a zoo. A message is going
to flash across the screen. 'Would you like to switch to your Husband Channel? Dave is ready
for you.'

If that happens, I might just break.

And that's when the television starts to ring.



Poetry



Grusha Singh
Jinni

Illustration by Mia Carnevale



Lost within an enchanted city street
I came upon a creature of bright light
born of ravage wind
and quivering might
that burned my soul with scorching heat

Reverence found a home in me
as I bowed to these otherworldly fires
the dancing flames that would not tire
impassively unbound like the sea



Adina Samuels

Lover's Laurel Laurel's Lover

Illustrations by Mia Carnevale



Lover's Laurel

limbs to leaf
extremities to evergreen

eternally still
still out of reach

my blood runs hot
with yours stopped cold

roots, you and I share.

yours, placid and limp, emerging from the earth below
mine, rigid and unforgiving, intertwining with what could
have been

desire rages within me
yet still your truncated torso twists away

with your breath went your words
and so in somber song we sit, silent.

Laurel's Lover

me, your muse,
but, dear Muses, why me?

the wish, to be my last
wished my breath away

fruitless feelings course
through a body unfamiliar

roots, you and I share.

mine, buried in the dust, anchored to eternity
yours, wild and invasive, adversely alive

my life devoid of depth
yet still your bestial build draws near

to my days of eternal abeyance
and so in solitary sedation I sit, silent.



Cameron Scott

The Devil in Iron

Illustrations by Stephan “Sven” Goslinski

I had that awful dream again—
It harried me through the night.
The one which shows that eerie place
Where not a thing feels right.

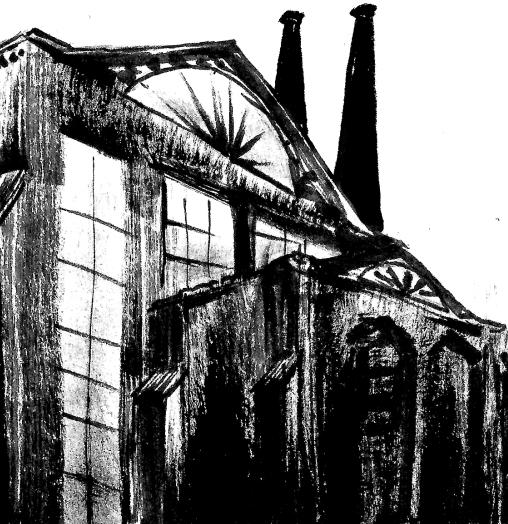
Far o'er the brow of yonder hill
And past the ashen plain;
Beyond the gutted Southern Sprawl
And through the fog and rain,

Some fifty thousand acres lie
Forgotten and unploughed,
Dark-windowed farmsteads dot the land
'Neath heavy, drifting clouds.

I saw it from a distance once
When high upon a hill.
That night in sleep I trod its soil,
Each night I tread it still.

And when I'm in that dreary land
Though lucid, still I'm drawn
Towards a point some five miles in
Before the break of dawn.

There lies a field of deepest blue
With naught at all around
Save for a red-brick factory
Whose east wall's fallen down.



And through the hole in the east wall,
Thence sprouts an iron tower
Which in strange whispers calls my name
And hums with eldritch power.

Its voice is one I cannot place,
If it has one at all,
But every word makes my heart race –
I must obey the call!

And so I slog through caustic muck
Towards that singing spire
The humming punctures through my ears
And bathes my brain in fire.

As I draw closer to my goal
I see its form in full.
My every fibre bids me run!
But I can't fight its pull.

It seems to grow out of the ground
And it is growing still—
Moreso like rot than iron wrought;
With purpose and with will.

The tower's frame is strongly built
From twisted engine parts
But nestled 'twixt the rusted beams
Beat countless living hearts.



And deep in my own heart I know
Whence came those so entwined.
The empty landscape makes it clear:
The fate of all mankind!

A shriek then tears the heavy air:
A dreadful, wailing moan!
Like whistling steam and anguished screams
In countless off-key tones

It pierces through my very soul
And bursts it at the seams
My mortal brain it hews in twain
And rends the cloth of dreams.

And when I wake, with fear I shake
For waking can't dispel
The sense of dread inside my head:
Once more, I've witnessed Hell.

The tower's growing faster now
Than I have ever seen.
And someday soon to Heaven's door
Will stretch that vile machine.

I've never been a pious man
But I know the devil's real
For I have seen him in my dreams
Built out of flesh and steel.



Callum Hutchinson

The Land Beyond the Gate

Illustrations by Stephan “Sven” Goslinski

“There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.”
An arcane importance in the budding of a flower.
We ignore this;
We motor through life without checking the rear-view mirrors.
But every so often,
Something makes us glance at the mirror.
And in the reflection of the glass,
What seemed so ordinary through naked eyes
Is revealed to be something more:
A Gate.





The doors inch open,
And from the crevice between them
The Gatekeeper smiles at you.
He creeps away, beckoning you to come.
Panicked, you return to yourself, to the familiar
And you continue to motor along.
But no matter how far you drive,
That metallic shriek from another world echoes in your mind,
And leads you back to the Land beyond the Gate.

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